

LEAN 101

Trust & Communication

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Lean = New, shared understandings of behaviors, expectations, and standards

Generally speaking, people are reasonably predictable, and -- generally speaking -- most of us are glad about that and, in fact, count on it every day in everything we do.

This can apply to all kinds of circumstances. For example, even if you know and are frustrated that your manager is likely going to be aloof, political in the worst sense, and resistant to any suggestions you have for change, it is at the same time reassuring to know what you can expect. Similarly, it is both frustrating and reassuring for the manager to believe, for example, that staff do not want to change what they are comfortable doing, will resist any of his/her ideas for change, and will promptly erect barriers to any change.

Not only can even such expectations be reassuring, but so can the stereotypes and assumptions that often underlie them.

What would happen, in this situation, if the manager suddenly starts accepting staff ideas for improvements or if staff insists on identifying barriers to change? What happens when the manager, who may have been the one to set the direction and define procedures, no longer dismisses or minimizes staff ideas and expects improvement? When staff make suggestions for improvement and expect the changes to occur? Both the manager and staff may become wary and unsure of each other's motives and anxious or distrustful because neither any longer knows what to expect of the other. Each may become reluctant to change, to commit to action, and to suggest improvements. Usually, you probably would have expected positive results from such "positive" changes in behavior and would not have predicted these unexpected and unintended reactions. This can be confusing and misdirecting ("See, I changed and he/she/they're worse than ever!") -- but now with even more frustration, cynicism, and mistrust than before.

Change -- even what might be considered positive change -- in expected behaviors and standards can erode trust, and there must be trust if meaningful improvement and change are to take place. One of the major challenges in managing change, then, becomes that of maintaining (or creating) and nurturing trust based on new and shared understandings of behaviors, expectations, and standards. Communication is key to assuring that everyone has and trusts these new, shared understandings.

What could this communication look like?

Inspire a Shared Vision: Well, first, it isn't only about the manager rallying staff to heroically "do it for the customer" or staff expecting the manager to magically bring about change. It is about planning the process of change together, about feeling safe in taking risks, and about honesty, integrity, and respect for each other and each other's work. It isn't only about a shared work vision but is also about a shared communication vision -- about how we will communicate.

Model the Way: It is the responsibility of managers and each person, supported by agreed-upon ground rules, to assure that issues, suggestions, and ideas are adequately aired and seriously considered, and that others' perspectives and ideas are not dismissed, derided, or belittled.

Perhaps most importantly, each person has to mean what he/she says. Each person has to walk the talk and has to be seen to be doing it and to be doing it consistently and predictably. Benjamin Franklin said, "Well done is better than well said."

Challenge the Process: Absolutely key to making improvements is the ability of all staff to question the work, to question the process – the ability of those doing the work at any level to identify waste and to make suggestions for change and improvement.

It is not possible for staff to "challenge" the process if there is no trust or opportunity for safe, risk-taking communication. It must be recognized and explicitly communicated that different perspectives are, in fact, valued, that teamwork does not equal one opinion/mind -- that teamwork is about people sharing their ideas, concerns, and disparate perspectives, working together toward common goals.

Enable Others to Act: Establishing Open, Clear, Ongoing Communication Channels

Communication must work in both directions; must have a commitment on everyone's part to share concerns and ideas, and must ensure a fair and safe environment for communication and discussion. This requires a thoughtful, planned infrastructure to serve as the foundation for communication -- allowing the development of open, ongoing, and diverse communication channels.

As a foundation, this can include traditional communication methods, such as --

- Newsletters,
- Updates,
- Website,
- Regular, ongoing Training/education,
- Special seminars,
- Special mailings,
- Surveys,
- Progress reports

This infrastructure must also include more interactive opportunities such as regular, ongoing briefings and meetings. These opportunities must be embedded in existing organizational communication structures, for example, the traditional hierarchical management, supervisory, and staff/unit meetings, planning meetings, etc. In some areas, perhaps even daily staff meetings such as morning status/check-ins. It is important that all these are on a known, regular, and consistent basis and that they provide for open, thorough, and safe discussion.

Failure to maintain ongoing, regular communication and sharing of information signals to others the lack of a commitment to the process and to its underlying principles.

Encourage the Heart: Such a cascade of trusted, ongoing communication will ensure that everyone is informed and, most importantly, that everyone has an opportunity to discuss and be involved in the issues and changes in each office and the department in order to provide the best quality, most efficient, and most effective services through the elimination of waste. This will help to improve morale and build commitment to achieving the department's vision and mission. It will encourage the individual to feel valued, to contribute, and to grow.